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ABSTRACT

Although career pathing would seem to have utility for mental health organizations, little research has been done on such activities. In a survey of 314 administrators employed in 109 community level, public sector mental health organizations, six career types of mental health administrators were identified on the basis of: (1) education; (2) homogeneity of work experience; and (3) number of service positions held prior to entering administration. Data analyses revealed that perceived role characteristics and personality variables differed across educational levels, while factors considered when taking another job differed based on the administrator's work experience. Administrators who began their career in mental health and had held two or more direct service positions engaged in more diversified and general activities than less educated or experienced administrators. The findings have implications for the areas of administrator selection, placement, and retention. (Author/JAC)

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Career Paths of Mental Health Administrators

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Career Paths of Mental Health Administrators

Organizations employ the concept of "career" to describe a series of job experiences which provide a person with improved skills and abilities (Morgan, 1980). It has been assumed that placing people in more responsible jobs is a developmental process which makes them better equipped for positions in upper levels of management. Careers have been gaining increased attention in the organizational literature (Hall & Hall, 1980; Morgan, 1980: Super, 1980) as organizations seek to develop skills and experiences for employees so that a pool of knowledgeable, talented, and promotable individuals is developed.

Although career pathing would seem to have utility for mental health organizations, a review of the mental health literature indicated a lack of attention to such activities. Literature on the Clinician Executive (Ewalt, 1980; Feldman, 1980; Levinson & Klerman, 1972; Steger, Woodhouse, & Goocey, 1973; White, 1980), however, implies such development has been ongoing for years. This literature addresses the transition from direct services to management which implies a career path. What is lacking in this literature is a complete description of the available career paths, differences between individual occupants

of various career paths and which career paths lead to which type of administrative position. The essence of the question is what effect do different job and educational experience have on administrative positions obtained. Do different histories lead to different job titles, do they lead to the same job title, but with different duties, or do they lead to jobs with the same titles and duties but occupants differing on how they respond to these duties (e.g., less satisfied)? Such differences, if found, would have implications for selection of employees, as well as implications for the development of employees once they are on the job. From the mental health professional's perspective, an understanding of career paths typically taken and where these paths lead would aid in career decision making.

The study reported here explored possible differences between career paths for a sample of administrators. Administrators were chosen because they theoretically would be at the end, or near the end, of a career ladder within an organization. Thus, the past experience of these individuals would allow determination of which career paths were most frequently occurring.

Method

Subjects and Systems

Mental health administrators were requested to participate in a study of community level mental health organizations in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. All systems were public sector, and single or multi county in scope. All were overseen by a Chief Executive Officer for whom usually worked a variety of other administrators such as disability coordinators, program coordinators, or directors of agencies. Overseeing each system was a "mental health" board responsible to a county board(s) of commissioners.

The administrators were 82% male; 14% were 30 years of age or younger, 47% ages 31 to 50, 28% 41 to 50 with 11% over the age of 51. The sample was primarily married (84%) with an average of 2.3 children, a majority of whom were under the age of 18. The total sample appeared highly educated with 60% having a Master's degree and 11% the doctorate. On the other hand, 29% had a Bachelor's degree or less. Inspection of academic discipline of administrators' highest degrees showed that 18% were in psychology, 34% in social work, 6% in guidance and

counseling with the remaining 42% in other areas such as the ministry, law, etc. Only 6% had a degree in a program of study with an emphasis in managerial principles.

All such systems in Wisconsin and Minnesota were contacted, while a 40% stratified (rural-urban) random sample of Michigan systems were selected. Of the 110 systems whose CEO's were contacted, 109 allowed participation of at least some of their administrators. In one system the director allowed staff to be interviewed, but not himself; while in one system, the director agreed to be interviewed, but did not allow others to participate. From these 109 systems, 108 CEO's and 206 other administrators comprised the final sample.

Instrument

A semistructured interview technique was employed. Administrators were asked questions concerning work activities, skills needed to perform their jobs, past work history both within the organization and without, perceived training needs for self and subordinates, stress levels, precipitators of stress, characteristics of the controlling board, and perceived problems on the job. In addition, past living history was obtained along with marital status and number and ages of children. The

questionnaire employed five point Likert scales for areas such as job satisfaction, organizational climate, personality measures, nonwork satisfaction, intention to leave and stress. Table 1 presents a summary of variables relevant for the present research. A measure of internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha) for clusters of items is presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

Each administrator was interviewed separately in his or her office by one of three interviewers who had rehearsed the interview process until consistency of presentation was achieved. The interview required from one to four hours to complete. A questionnaire was left with each administrator to complete at his or her earliest convenience. Phone call contacts at one and (if needed) three months post interview were utilized to maximize questionnaire return rate. A response rate of 92% was obtained (N = 287).

Content analyses of interview items were carried out. Categories for Activities, Skills, Training Needs, and Burnout/Stress presented in Table 1 represent the result of this process. The means reported for job

activities in Table 7 represent the percentage of administrators with a response coded into that category. Thus 76% of all administrators interviewed stated they engaged in work out of the organization, 67% in work most directly involving people, etc.

To develop a taxonomy of administrator career paths several specific variables were initially considered including major in college, age, when an educational degree was awarded, if the administrator returned to school after working, and positions held in the organization. Table 2 presents career types identified on the basis of the three personal history variables selected: (a) educational level, (b) work experience in mental health and nonmental health, and (c) number of direct service positions held prior to entering administration. These variables were chosen because: (a) of availability of data for all managers in the sample, and (b) they allowed for adequate sample sizes for career types across the diverse organizations studied.

As shown in Table 2, six career types resulted. These types included administrators whose careers began in the field of mental health having (a) a Bachelor's degree or less (MHB), (b) an advanced degree who held one direct service

position (MHA1), (c) an advanced degree and two or more direct service positions (MHA2), and (d) an advanced degree and no direct service positions (MHA0). Of those administrators who did not begin their careers in the field of mental health, two additional career types were identified, those individuals who possessed a Bachelor's degree or less (NMHB) and those who held an advanced degree (NMHA). Table 2 also indicates the percentage of administrators represented by each of the career types. Although most administrators held advanced degrees and began their careers in the field of mental health, a significant percentage (37%) of the sample began their careers in a field other than mental health. Number of direct service positions was not considered for all "Bachelor's level or less" administrators and those with advanced degrees who did not begin their career in mental health because the sample size for analyses for such groups would have been too small.

Insert Table 2 about here

Results

Discriminant Analyses on Individual Components of Careers

Ten discriminant analyses were computed (categories

of variables presented in Table 1) for each of the three history variables. The purpose of these analyses was to determine if the three history variables in and of themselves related to managers' perceptions and roles. Results indicated significant differences in perceived role characteristics and personality variables across administrators' educational levels. For factors weighed when considering taking another job, significant differences were found between managers with or without nonmental health work experience. No significant differences were obtained in analyses considering number of direct service positions.

Table 3 displays means, standard deviations, F ratios, standardized weights, correlations with the function and group centroids across education levels for perceived role characteristics ($X^2(14) = 30.51$, $p < .05$). Job identification produced the only significant univariate F ratio. Inspection of the standardized weights indicated role ambiguity and role conflict were also contributing factors, however the low correlations with the function lead to the conclusion that this contribution is minor. Those individuals who do not have a college degree had greater job identification than administrators with either a Bachelor's or advanced degrees, with Bachelor's level

managers reporting the lowest job identification. Caution must be exercised in these interpretations as the number of managers with less than a Bachelor's degree is small.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 displays the significant discriminant function ($X^2(3) = 19.53$, $p < .02$) for personality variables across the three education levels. Inspection of the standardized weights indicates that need for achievement and need for autonomy were contributing variables to the function. Those administrators with a Bachelor's degree had greater need for autonomy and less need for achievement (doing better than others) than either managers with below a BA/BS or those with advanced degrees.

Insert Table 4 about here

The significant discriminant function ($X^2(8) = 17.96$, $p < .03$) for importance factors in taking another job for administrators with and without nonmental health work experience is presented in Table 5. As can be seen those with nonmental health work backgrounds rated community values and leisure facilities in a community significantly more important when considering another job than managers

who began work in mental health.

Insert Table 5 about here

While discriminant analyses performed on job responsibilities for the three levels of education did not result in a significant discriminant function, four of the seven variables produced significant univariate F ratios (see Table 6). Administrators with advanced degrees had the largest staff size and also tended to have the greatest number of direct service personnel working for them, as well as the greatest span of control (number of individuals reporting to them). Paradoxically, administrators with less than a Bachelor's degree had more administrators in their units than other managers. Administrators with Bachelor's degrees had the smallest staff size and also the least number of direct service personnel, numbers of administrators per unit, and span of control. The highest and least educated administrators appear similar when means for job responsibility variables are inspected.

Insert Table 6 about here

Discriminant Analyses on Career Paths

In order to determine if the three history variables in combination (six career types) were related to administrators' activities, feelings and perceptions, separate Multiple Discriminant Analyses were performed for each of the sets of variables listed in Table 1 across these six career types. The analysis of activities performed on the job produced the only significant discriminant function ($X^2(50) = 69.32$, $p < .05$). The mean number of administrators who listed engaging in each activity, standard deviation, univariate F ratios, standardized weight, correlation with the function and group centroids are presented in Table 7. A comparison of standardized weights reveals activities such as Out of Organization, People, and Administration of a Specific Agency define one end of the continuum and Program Coordination the other. The more general activities of Out of Organization, People, and Administration of an Agency were more likely to be performed by those administrators who had advanced degrees who held two or more direct service positions prior to entering administration; while tasks of a more specific nature were more likely to be performed by less educated administrators or those having held fewer direct service positions. The former

group of activities seemed to the authors to imply greater responsibility than the latter, and thus it was possible the results were produced by demographic differences between occupants of the six career types. To determine if this were the case, a discriminant analysis was computed which compared the six career types on biographical and work data variables (age of administrator, months in organization, months in position, number of organizations worked in, and CEO or not). Results were not significant indicating the findings in Table 7 reflect differences in career types rather than differences in biographical characteristics of occupants of different career types.

Insert Table 7 about here

Discussion

While most mental health administrators in this sample had (a) a Master's or more advanced degree in a mental health discipline and (b) work experience as a direct service provider, many did not. The managers studied presented heterogeneous careers with one notable exception: almost none had a "management" degree. Thus, comparing the clinician/executive with MBA or other formally trained managers was not possible, and

such research must await more of the latter being trained and employed. Whether this will occur is debatable for if these 109 mental health systems across a three state area are in any way generalizable to the nation, almost all managers employed lack such formal managerial education. Thus, the career path of such managers may be to obtain formal managerial training after being on the job (e.g., continuing education, inservice, or state or national organization sponsored activities).

Selection

Analyses of career paths of mental health administrators showed that specific histories of education and work experiences were related to activities performed on the job, but not to differences in job title or level. If an organization has a vacant position which requires a variety of skills and a greater focus on external relationships, a person with the credentials of an advanced degree and the experience of having held several direct service positions would appear to offer the best fit. Advanced education taken alone as a history variable is also related to positions with greater responsibility. If the administrative job description is more specific and requires primarily in house activities, then either persons with less education or those having held fewer

direct service positions would offer the better fit. Mental health professionals seeking a career ladder in administration should consider the value of an advanced degree and multiple direct service positions.

Beyond this one significant finding, the most striking result was the lack of significant differences between administrators with different career paths. While heterogenous career background affects what these managers reported they did on the job, administrators responded to their jobs the same regardless of past work history. Apparently organizations and individuals are choosing appropriately, resulting in a good fit. For example, occupants of positions with different career paths may report similar levels of job satisfaction because they are doing jobs consistent with their backgrounds. Alternately, those for whom there was a poor fit may turnover and occupy future positions which better match their work history.

Of the three personal history variables, education and mental health/nonmental health backgrounds provided significant results. A more varied work history leads to higher valuation of certain nonwork factors as important in one's life. Implications for selection are clear: those with nonmental health work experience will be more concerned with the nonwork areas of leisure and

community values which may affect their decision on whether to accept a position.

Administrators with the most education, regardless of background were employed in the larger mental health systems (e.g., the largest staffs, greatest number of direct service personnel and largest span of control). While the sample of managers below a Bachelor's level is small, one cannot ignore that they closely resemble the highly educated administrators on all four significant objective role characteristics (job responsibilities). While none of the individuals with less than a Bachelor's degree appeared as mental health coordinators or as developmental disability coordinators, they did work as Directors (N=2), alcohol and other drug abuse (AODA) coordinators (N=5), directors of AODA agencies (N=4), or business managers (N=3). Thus, if an organization selects a manager or promotes from within an individual without a Bachelor's degree, the position of choice owuld seem to be either business manager or AODA related.

Development/Retention

Administrators with Bachelor's degrees may be reporting the least amount of job identification of the three education groups, possibly because of less responsibility. Lack of commitment to the organization (Bluedorn, 1980; Mobley, Griffith, Hand, & Meglino, 1979) and

low identification with the job (Hartman & Perlman, Note 1) have been found to relate significantly to turnover. Therefore, it could be beneficial for employers to assign greater administrative responsibilities to Bachelor's degreed managers in an attempt to increase their job identification and, thus, potentially reduce turnover rates. Also to improve the knowledge and "talent" of future managers, staff in an organization should be offered (a) advancement in different types of direct service positions and (b) if at the Bachelor's level, opportunities to add to their education. However, Bachelor's level individuals demonstrated significantly greater need for autonomy and less need for achievement than other administrators with more or less education. This lower need for achievement in some cases could hinder the success of organizationally implemented development programs.

Methodological Problems and Future Research

The research is by no means the definitive statement of mental health management career paths. Initial problems emerged because of the limited career research published, with no work having been completed within the mental health field. This is not to indicate that career path research and programs are not ongoing, but that written accounts of these have not appeared. Problems

also arose due to the lack of hierarchy of mental health organizations and the inconsistent and poorly defined titles for mental health administrators. Few differences resulted from the conceptualization utilized herein and more detailed information of administrators' job histories would aid in better understanding career paths of these public sector managers. Future researchers would further benefit from obtaining a more detailed description of such individuals' past and present positions. More work studying those managers with nonmental health work experience, why they are now mental health managers, and how they compare with their counterparts who have only worked in mental health is needed. Moreover, does a poor fit between career type and position result in turnover, or a change in the job to be consistent with the skills of the occupant or additional training? Finally, development of a model of public sector career paths, specifically those eventuating in management positions would prove beneficial.

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Footnotes

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Table 1

Administrator Job Characteristics

Activities performed on the job (could list up to six)

- Out of organization
- People
- Regulations
- Budget monitoring
- Program development
- Budget development
- Operations
- Contracts
- Administration of specific organization

Skills need to be effective on the job (could list up to eight)

- General administration and management
- Communication
- Personal characteristics (leadership, pragmatism, etc.)
- Interpersonal
- Specific disability area knowledge
- Systems/Community
- Budget
- Political
- Problem solving

Table 1 cont.

Perceived role characteristic clusters

- Role ambiguity
- Challenge and variety of job
- Role overload
- Role conflict
- Job autonomy

Job responsibilities

- Budget for areas of responsibility
- Number of agencies contracted with
- Size of staff
- Number of direct service personnel
- Number of administrative personnel
- Span of control

Training needs for self (could list up to eight)

- Specific administrative skills (problem solving, conflict resolution, persuasion, delegating, setting policy, personnel management, administrative supervision, time management, etc.)
- General administrative skills (MBA training, generally knowing more, etc.)
- Money (budgeting, cost effectiveness, accounting, contracts, grants)
- Technical (program evaluation, research, computers, management information systems)

Table 1 cont.

Work satisfaction (Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire-Short Form)

- Intrinsic
- Extrinsic

Identification clusters

- Identification with job
- Identification with organization
- Job importance

Personality clusters

- Type A
- Need for achievement
- Need for autonomy
- Need for power

Factors considered when considering another job

- Extrinsic work
- Coworkers
- Intrinsic work
- Family
- Community facilities
- Leisure facilities
- Geographic location
- Community Values

Table 1 cont.

Stress/Burnout

Frequency of experienced stress[a]

Causes of stress (could list up to three)

Role (overload, deadlines, delays, too much people contact)

Out of organization work (politics, board meetings county, state, rules, mandates, laws, public relations)

Interactions and conflict (colleagues, board, superior, clientele, staff, union, other agencies, etc.)

Budget

Self generated (lack experience and training, perceive the work as frustrating, need more rewards and support, etc.)

Service issues (program development, organization of delivery)

Problems faced on the job[b]

Interpersonal (staff, relationships, personalities)

Out of organization (politics, system, board, state, community relations)

Role (overload, ambiguity, crises, change, etc.)

Table 1 cont.

Budget

Personal (self generated, personal style, keeping global perspective, isolation from direct service, etc.)

Services (demand for services, quality of services, client issues)

[a] Coded on a six point scale from never to more than once daily.

[b] Of the 310 administrators responding, 32 claimed no difficult job problems.

Table 2

Definition of Six Career Types and Distribution of Administrators

First Job	Degree	# of Direct Service Positions	# of Administrators	%	Label
Mental Health	BA, BS, or less	Not Applicable	28	9.6	MHB
Mental Health	Advanced	1	49	16.8	MHA1
Mental Health	Advanced	2 or more	71	24.3	MHA2
Mental Health	Advanced	0	37	12.7	MHA0
Nonmental Health	BA, BS, or less	Not Applicable	38	13.0	NMHB
Nonmental Health	Advanced	Not Applicable	69	23.6	NMHA

Table 3

Significant Discriminant Function on Perceived

Role Characteristics for the Levels of Administration Education

Perceived Role Clusters	Cronbach Alpha	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Univariate F Ratio	Standardized Weight	Correlation with Function
Role Ambiguity	.69	6.55	2.48	1.40	.41	.15
Challenge & Variety of Job	.61	15.34	2.54	.65	.04	.23
Role Overload	.61	7.15	2.26	1.60	.22	.29
Role Conflict	.61	6.91	2.23	1.83	-.36	.04
Identification with Job	.79	8.48	1.06	8.62***	.89	.82
Job Autonomy	.77	20.43	2.94	1.04	-.26	-.01

Contributing Variable to the Function

Education Level	Job Identification	
	Group $\bar{X}$	Group Centroid
Less than BA/BS (N=14)	9.00	.33
BA/BS (N=52	7.98	-.60
Advanced (N=215)	8.56	.12

***$p < .001$.

Table 4

Significant Discriminant Function on Personality Variables

for Three Administrator Levels of Education

Personality Variables	Cronbach Alpha	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	F	Standardized Weight	Correlation with Function
Need for Achievement	.56	18.26	3.12	4.45*	.67	.73
Need for Autonomy	.50	12.82	2.67	1.62	-.68	-.45
Need for Power	.70	17.30	3.66	3.25*	.33	.54
Type A	.78	17.78	3.08	1.31	.08	.40

Contributing Variables to the Function

	Need for Achievement Group $\bar{X}$	Need for Autonomy Group $\bar{X}$	Group Centroids
Less than BA/BS (N=13)	18.77	12.77	.25
BA/BS (N=52)	17.12	13.42	-.46
Advanced (N=209)	18.51	12.68	.10

*$p < .05$.

Table 5

Significant Discriminant Function on Factors Evaluated When Considering Taking Another Job Across Administrators with Work Experience In or Without Mental Health

Factors	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	F	Standardized Weight	Correlation with Function
Extrinsic Work	16.38	2.22	1.51	.30	.28
Coworkers	10.75	1.25	0.01	-.22	.02
Intrinsic Work	11.21	1.05	0.29	-.25	-.12
Family	6.35	1.62	0.47	-.33	-.16
Community Facilities	12.13	1.91	3.62	.10	.44
Leisure Facilities	9.36	1.37	4.93*	.40	.51
Geographic Location	6.02	1.18	2.93	.32	.39
Community Values	5.31	1.30	8.84**	.68	.68

Contributing Variables to the Function

	Community Values Group $\bar{X}$	Leisure Facilities Group $\bar{X}$	Group Centroids
Nonmental Health (N=96)	5.63	9.60	.36
Mental Health (N=172)	5.14	9.22	-.20

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

Table 6

Significant Means and Univariate F Ratios for

Administrator Job Responsibilities

Category	Staff Size	Number of Direct Service Personnel	Number of Administrators per Unit	Number Reporting to Administrator
Less than BA/BS (N=14)	30.00	15.93	3.21	5.29
BA/BS (N=52)	9.40	6.62	.73	3.79
Advanced (N=226)	35.10	21.51	2.66	6.00
Univariate F Ratio	3.08*	3.10*	3.79*	4.64*

*p<.05.

Table 7

Significant Discriminant Function for Job Activities

				Standardized Weight	Correlation with Function
Out of Organization (public relations, outreach, etc.)	.76	.79	1.97	.60	.40
People (staff, meetings, etc.)	.67	.64	1.74	.61	.44
Programming (monitoring and coordination)	.47	.59	2.68*	-.2[illegible]	-.51
Regulations (personnel, service delivery, paperwork)	.46	.62	.78	.13	-.01
Budget Monitoring	.48	.50	.60	.27	.18
Program Development (creation, implementation, grants)	.46	.65	1.27	.21	.02
Operations (planning, evaluation, data management)	.45	.50	.53	.24	.19
Monetary Development (budget)	.44	.50	1.64	-.07	-.16
Contracts	.21	.41	.43	.23	.03
Administration of Specific Agency	.15	.35	1.85	.55	.41

Table 7 cont.

Contributing Activities to the Function

Career	Out of Organization	People	Program Monitoring & Coordination	Administration	Group Centroid
	Group $\bar{X}$	Group $\bar{X}$	Group $\bar{X}$	Group $\bar{X}$	
MHB	.71	.54	.57	.14	-.34
MHA1	.76	.53	.59	.10	-.21
MHA2	.82	.82	.32	.25	.47
MHAO	.76	.65	.38	.08	-.15
NMHB	.42	.61	.63	.11	-.53
NMHA	.90	.74	.43	.13	.17

*$p < .05$.